

### **Bring Out the Pitchforks!**

Twenty years is a long time. That's how long Rebecca and Isaac remained childless.

According to the Midrash, Rebecca was physically unable to bear children. It would take a literal miracle to do so. This is why Isaac and Rebecca pleaded to G-d so often and with such great intensity. Isaac would stand in one corner praying, and Rebecca would stand in the other, **not giving up until finally, their prayers were answered.**

Soon after they were blessed with children, Isaac and his family relocated to Gerar, where he farmed the land and dug wells. He reopened the wells of Abraham and dug his own. He gave the wells names and struggled to retain control over them.

**Praying and well-digging have much in common.** For both, one needs the qualities that Isaac epitomized: restraint, discipline, faith, and introspectiveness.

The word used to describe Isaac's intense pleading with G-d is *vayeatar*. The Talmud (Yevamot 64a) associates this word with a pitchfork. Just as the pitchfork overturns the grain on the threshing floor, so, too, the prayers of the righteous overturn negative decrees.

#### 1. Yevamot (Levirate Marriage) 64a

R. Isaac stated: Why were our ancestors barren? Because the Holy One, blessed be He, longs to hear the prayer of the righteous.

R. Isaac further stated: Why is the prayer of the righteous compared to a pitchfork? As a pitchfork turns the sheaves of grain from one position to another, **so does the prayer of the righteous turn the dispensations of the Holy One**, blessed be He, from the attribute of anger to the attribute of mercy.

The Hebrew word usually associated with praying is *lehitpallel*. It has the same root as to judge and to join together.

**The reflexive form is used, which signifies that a person who is praying is meant to judge himself and acquire a new perspective, while strengthening his bonds with G-d.**

To pray means to step out of the many conflicts and fragmentations of our lives. To gain a true judgment about ourselves, our relationship to G-d and our world. To struggle to control our distracting thoughts and our inner turmoil.

To pray means to dig deep within ourselves. To clear away dirt, rocks, and debris. To have faith that eventually, we will find water. Deep down beyond our self-centered ego lies the fresh flowing waters of our Divine core. Prayer helps us become reunited with that part of our selves.

To pray means to discover a fresh perspective about who we are and our reality. **The person who begins prayers should be very different from the person who concludes them.** You began as someone ensnared in your own self-centered reality, feeling arrogant and entitled. By digging deep into your emotional and spiritual self, you emerge as a humbler individual, aware of and grateful for all the good G-d has given.

In fact, perhaps this is how prayer actually effects change. The person who starts praying may not merit what he or she desires. But the newly transformed, far more spiritual individual concluding prayers may be worthy of what he or she seeks—and use it to further spiritual growth.

In this week's portion, **Isaac teaches us that to pray is to dig.** Each one of us can get out our pitchforks and dig. Let's dig deeply.

#### 2. Matthew 7:7-12

<sup>7</sup>"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. <sup>8</sup>For **everyone who asks receives**; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened. <sup>9</sup>"Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone? <sup>10</sup>Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? <sup>11</sup>If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! <sup>12</sup>So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

a. One of the most pervasive features of (Yeshua's) teaching on prayer is the assurance it will be heard ... **But such praying is not for selfish ends but always for the glory of God** according to kingdom concerns. So here: the Sermon on the Mount lays down the righteousness, sincerity, humility, purity, and love expected of (Yeshua's) followers; and now it assures them such gifts are theirs if sought through prayer.<sup>2</sup>

#### b. Matthew 18:19

"Again, truly I tell you that **if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them** by my Father in heaven.

1) These two verses should not in this setting be taken as a promise regarding any prayer on which two or three believers agree. Scripture is rich in prayer promises (21:22; John 14:13-14; 15:7-

1 Chana Weisberg, *Shabbat deLights*, (Chabad.org), pp. 79-81.

2 Frank E. Gaebelin, Gen. Ed., *The Expositors Bible Commentary, Vol. 8*, (Regency Reference Library, Zondervan Publishing House), p. 186.

8, 16); but if this passage deals with prayer at all, it is restricted by the context and by the phrase *peri pantos pragmatos* (NIV, “about anything”), which should here be rendered “about any judicial matter”: the word *pragma* often has that sense (cf. 1Cor 6:1), a sense nicely fitting the argument in Matthew 18.<sup>3</sup>

a) Matthew 18:15-18

<sup>15</sup>“If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. <sup>16</sup>But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ <sup>17</sup>If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the *k’hilah*, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. <sup>18</sup>“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

c. Matthew 21:22

**If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer.”**

1) (Yeshua) used the fig tree to teach the power of *believing* prayer, an extrapolation on the theme of faith, the lesson just taught by the immediate withering of the fig tree. But belief in the (Apostolic Writings) is never reduced to forcing oneself to “believe” what he does not really believe. Instead, it is related to genuine trust in God and obedience to and discernment of His will ... exercised by the believer, **such faith reposes on the will of God who acts.**<sup>4</sup>

d. Mark 11:22-25

<sup>22</sup>“Have faith in God,” Yeshua answered. <sup>23</sup>“Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. <sup>24</sup>Therefore I tell you, **whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.** <sup>25</sup>And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”

1) This statement is also made in the context of the incident with the fig tree.

e. Luke 11:9

<sup>9</sup>“So I say to you: **Ask and it will be given to you;** seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.

1) Threefold synonymous parallelism. Each of these sentences say the same thing using different words.

Ask and it will be given to you;  
seek and you will find  
knock and the door will be opened to you.

a) Luke 11:1-8

<sup>1</sup>One day Yeshua was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples.” <sup>2</sup>He said to them, “When you pray, say: “Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come. <sup>3</sup>Give us each day our daily bread. <sup>4</sup>Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation. ”

<sup>5</sup>Then Yeshua said to them, “Suppose you have a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say, ‘Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; <sup>6</sup>a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have no food to offer him.’ <sup>7</sup>And suppose the one inside answers, ‘Don’t bother me. The door is already locked, and my children and I are in bed. I can’t get up and give you anything.’ <sup>8</sup>I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, **yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need.**

f. John 14:13

<sup>13</sup>And **I will do whatever you ask in my name**, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

1) The power of the disciples originated in prayer. (Yeshua) could hardly have made more emphatic the declaration that whatever they should ask in his name, he would do. **The phrase “in my name,” however, is not a talisman for the command or supernatural energy. He did not wish it to be used as a magical charm like an Aladdin’s lamp.** It was both a guarantee, like the endorsement on a check, and a limitation on the petition; for he would grant only such petitions as could be presented consistently with his character and purpose. **In prayer we call on him to work out his purpose, not simply to gratify our whims.** The answer is promised so that the (Messiah) may bring glory to the Father. The disciples obedience to him will be the test of their love.<sup>5</sup>

3 Ibid., p. 403

4 Ibid., p. 446.

5 Ibid., Vol. 9, p. 146.

g. John 16:23

<sup>23</sup>In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. <sup>24</sup>Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

h. The roots of the Word of Faith movement and the name it and claim it message have more in common with new age metaphysics than with biblical (Faith). However, instead of us creating our reality with our thoughts, as new age proponents advise, name it and claim it teachers tell us that we can use the “power of faith” to create our own reality or get what we want. In essence, *faith* is redefined from “a trust in a holy and sovereign God despite our circumstances” to “a way of controlling God to give us what we want.” Faith becomes a force whereby we can get what we want rather than an abiding trust in God even during times of trials and suffering.<sup>6</sup>

3. Matthew 6:9-10

<sup>9</sup>“This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, <sup>10</sup>your kingdom come, **your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**

a. Matthew 26:39

<sup>39</sup>Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. **Yet not as I will, but as you will.**”

b. John 15:7,16

**<sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you ...** <sup>16</sup>You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you **so that you might go and bear fruit fruit that will last and SO THAT whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.**

c. James 1:5

<sup>5</sup>If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

1) 1Kings 3:3-14

<sup>3</sup>Solomon showed his love for the LORD by walking according to the instructions given him by his father David, except that he offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places. <sup>4</sup>The king went to Gibeon to offer sacrifices, for that was the most important high place, and Solomon offered a thousand burnt offerings on that altar. <sup>5</sup>**At Gibeon the LORD appeared to Solo-**

**mon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”** <sup>6</sup>Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day. <sup>7</sup>“Now, LORD my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. <sup>8</sup>Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. <sup>9</sup>**So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong.** For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

<sup>10</sup>The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. <sup>11</sup>So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, <sup>12</sup>I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. <sup>13</sup>Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for—both wealth and honor—so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. <sup>14</sup>And if you walk in obedience to me and keep my decrees and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

d. James 4:3

**<sup>3</sup>When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives,** that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

e. 1John 3:21-22

<sup>21</sup>Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God <sup>22</sup>**and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him.**

f. 1John 5:13-15

<sup>13</sup>I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. <sup>14</sup>This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that **if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.** <sup>15</sup>And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

#### 4. **Tefillah: Prayer**

The Hebrew word for prayer is *tefillah*. It is derived from the root *Pe-Lamed-Lamed* and the word *l'hitpallel*, meaning to judge oneself. This surprising word origin provides insight into the purpose of Jewish prayer. **The most important part of any Jewish prayer**, whether it be a prayer of petition, of thanksgiving, of praise of God, or of confession, **is the introspection it provides, the moment that we spend looking inside ourselves, seeing our role in the universe and our relationship to God.**

For an observant Jew, prayer is not simply something that happens in synagogue once a week (or even three times a day). Prayer is an integral part of everyday life. In fact, one of the most important prayers, the *Birkat Ha-Mazon*, is never recited in synagogue services!

Observant Jews are constantly reminded of God's presence and of our relationship with God, because we are continually praying to Him. Our first thoughts and words in the morning, even before we get out of bed, is a prayer thanking God for returning our souls to us. There are prayers to be recited just before enjoying a material pleasure, such as eating or drinking, or just after them, such as after eating or drinking or after buying new clothes or ordinary household items; prayers to recite before performing any *mitzvah* (commandment), such as washing hands or lighting candles; prayers to recite upon seeing anything unusual, such as a king, a rainbow, or the site of a great tragedy; prayers to recite whenever some good or bad thing happens; and prayers to recite before going to bed at night. All of these prayers are in addition to formal prayer services, which are performed three times a day every weekday and additional times on sabbaths and festivals.

##### **The Need for Prayer**

Many people today do not see the need for regular, formal prayer. "I pray when I feel inspired to, when it is meaningful to me", they say. This attitude overlooks two important things: the purpose of prayer, and the need for practice.

One purpose of prayer is to increase your awareness of God in your life and the role that God plays in your life. If you only pray when you feel inspired (that is, when you are already aware of God), then you will not increase your awareness of God.

In addition, if you want to do something well, you have to practice it continually, even when you do not feel like doing it. This is as true of prayer as it is of playing a sport, playing a musical instrument, or writing. The sense of humility and awe of God that is essential to proper prayer does not come easily to modern man, and will not simply come to you when you feel the need to pray. If you wait until inspiration

strikes, you will not have the skills you need to pray effectively. Before starting to pray regularly, many find that when they want to pray, they do not know how. They do not know what to say, or how to say it, or how to establish the proper frame of mind. If you pray regularly, you will learn how to express yourself in prayer.

##### **Kavanah: The Mindset for Prayer**

When you say the same prayers day after day, you might expect that the prayers would become routine and would begin to lose meaning. While this may be true for some people, this is not the intention of Jewish prayer. As said at the beginning of this discussion, the most important part of prayer is the introspection it provides. Accordingly, the proper frame of mind is vital to prayer.

The mindset for prayer is referred to as *kavanah*, which is generally translated as "concentration" or "intent". The minimum level of *kavanah* is an awareness that one is speaking to God and an intention to fulfill the obligation to pray. If you do not have this minimal level of *kavanah*, then you are not praying; you are merely reading. In addition, it is preferred that you have a mind free from other thoughts, that you know and understand what you are praying about and that you think about the meaning of the prayer.

Liturgical melodies are often used as an aid to forming the proper mindset. Many prayers and prayer services have traditional melodies associated with them. These can increase your focus on what you are doing and block out extraneous thoughts.